

IOE FACTSHEET ON UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AT WORK

Understanding violence at work

There is no universally accepted definition of “violence”, which is why violence is understood differently across countries, sectors and even individuals. The different relevant institutions and researchers have suggested several definitions and classifications. For instance, the World Health Organisation defines violence as the “intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, wrong development or deprivation”¹.

At the national level, definitions can change from one country to another. For instance, Belgian law distinguishes violence from harassment which is itself distinct from sexual harassment². Where there is no specific legislation on workplace violence, countries such as Slovakia tend to have a more general law on safety and health or equal treatment that covers the different aspects of work³.

Even across these definitions, there remain ambiguities on the clarity of the term. In some definitions, violence is limited to purely physical acts, whereas other definitions include other

forms of unacceptable behaviour such as mobbing and bullying. In order to better understand the issue and to come up with appropriate measures to address the different forms of unacceptable behaviour, clarity of terminology is a must. Defining the term “violence” too broadly to include all kinds of unacceptable behaviour will lead to a watering down of the term and result in measures that do not adequately address violence at work.

Why is tackling workplace violence important for Employers?

Violence in the world of work is a serious matter for society as a whole, not only because it represents a moral issue, but also because it is an issue of security, stability, public health and human rights. It is also a serious work-related issue because it affects work relations and workers’ health, productivity and engagement. Violence has negative implications on the mindset and the culture of individuals.

Quantifying the costs of workplace violence in monetary terms is not the right approach, as workplace violence has impacts that are often unquantifiable. A violent workplace reduces the

¹ WHO Report 2014 <http://www.who.int/topics/violence/en/>

² Law 11 June 2002 related to the protection against violence and moral or sexual harassment in the workplace

³ The Anti-Discrimination Act 365/2004 Section 6

health and morale of the workforce, thereby reducing the ability of the economy to fully optimise the potential of its human capital.

There are strong moral reasons for social partners, along with the government, to promote a violence-free working environment.

Risk factors for violence in the world of work

Violence does not discriminate and can happen to anyone, anywhere. However, there are certain groups of individuals who may be more at risk of being exposed to violence. Risk factors include working alone late at night or in the early morning hours, working in high-crime areas or in community settings and in homes where individuals have extensive contact with the public.

While these factors may increase the risk of violence at work, they do not automatically cause violence at work. Violence at work needs to be considered in the light of the situation and circumstance as well as perceptions. Misdiagnosing the risk factors results in action that is not targeted and risks not addressing the 'true' risk factor.

What should be done to address violence at work?

Addressing workplace violence calls for an integrated approach which requires joint responsibilities where all actors intervene to prevent and mitigate acts of violence in the workplace. All actors in the world of work should abstain from, prevent and address violence. Prevention of violence and mitigation when it occurs are the basic pillars of an efficient and effective approach.

Employers need to be able to manage workplaces to be violence-free and to create workplace cultures where it is absolutely clear that violent conduct will not be tolerated. However, isolated employer action is not sufficient. Workers also bear responsibility and need to actively cooperate in any anti-violence initiatives and measures taken by the employer.

Employers can only take effective action in the workplace, over which they have control. As violence at work is above all a reflection of existing perceptions and attitudes in society,

governments have an important responsibility to promote a general environment of non-acceptance of violence, starting with school education. Governments should also provide employers with the appropriate tools and policy frameworks that enable them to take effective action against workplace violence and provide a safe and healthy workplace.

The IOE's efforts to address violence at work

The IOE is committed to supporting its members in preventing and mitigating violence at work. In 2016, the Governing Body decided to place a standard-setting item on "Violence Against Women and Men in the World of Work" on the agenda of the 107th Session (June 2018) of the International Labour Conference. While Employers do not see the utility of having an additional international labour standard, as not every problem can be best resolved through a legal response, they are committed to coming up with a useful, flexible and relevant instrument.

A convention tends to be very limited in scope and risks excluding various inappropriate behaviours in its response to violence. A broader-scoped convention, on the other hand, risks becoming legally unclear and, by consequence, unratifiable. A recommendation has the advantage of being flexible and could provide guidance on additional aspects of "unacceptable behaviour at work". In particular, integrating violence at work as part of OSH, and linking this potential recommendation with the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187) can be an effective way towards establishing a safe and healthy workplace.

The IOE, together with its members, will continue to actively engage in this process in contributing to an enriching and useful standard-setting discussion in June 2018.

Please do not hesitate to visit our website www.ioe-emp.org for more information, in particular the "Gender" policy area. You can also contact IOE adviser Dr. Thannaletchimy Housset, Housset@ioe-emp.com for further details.